

**STATEMENT OF  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES**

**March 9, 2006**

**CONCERNING**

**H.R. 1370 – Federal Land Asset Inventory Reform Act of 2005  
H.R. 1644 – Puerto Rico Karst Conservation Act  
H.R. 2110 – Colorado Northern Front Range Mountain Backdrop Protection Study Act**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to provide the Department views on these three bills.

**H.R. 1370 – Federal Land Asset Inventory Reform Act of 2005**

H.R. 1370 directs the Secretary of the Interior to develop a multipurpose cadastre of Federal real property including identification of any Federal land which is no longer required to be owned by the Federal Government. The Department concurs with the Department of the Interior in opposition to the bill. USDA believes the appropriate inventory of the Forest Service real property is being met within existing authorities.

Presently, the US Forest Service is developing a number of geospatial applications. Some of these applications track features such as land ownership, land boundaries, land title, buildings, roads, trails and improvements on the land, special use authorizations, and natural resources, and some provide inventories of these features.

These applications include the Automated Lands Project (ALP), the Special Uses Data System (SUDS), the Infrastructure (INFRA), Natural Resource Inventory System (NRIS), and the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA).

These applications and inventories have been developed so as to be interoperable with each other and share as much data and information as possible to minimize costs and eliminate duplication. For example, the development of Standard Reference Tables and themes with the ALP application including such categories as state, congressional district, county, tribal, and unit boundaries are available for use by other Forest Service geospatial applications needing this standard reference information.

Certain applications have been designated as a “stewardship” application for tracking this geospatial information. ALP is the stewardship application for land status and land boundary information which is currently incorporated into the National Integrated Lands System (NILS), an application/data base jointly developed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service. NILS will allow the Forest Service and BLM to collect, maintain, and publish National Forest and BLM Public Land Survey System (PLSS) and land tenure records information from a common database and website. Testing of this application is now underway, with the Intermountain Region being the first test Region. If testing is successful, integration of the remaining ALP data into NILS will be completed within the next 12 to 18 months, including the land net of the PLSS.

While individual applications and inventories of real property by themselves may not represent an all inclusive cadastre, the interoperability of these applications and inventories allows several of the applications together to work as multipurpose cadastre for the Forest Service.

### **H.R. 1644 – Puerto Rico Karst Conservation Act**

H.R. 1644, the Puerto Rico Karst Conservation Act, would provide and promote cooperative efforts among the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, federal agencies and non-profit organizations, to conserve the natural resources of the karst area of Puerto Rico.

The karst area of Puerto Rico is threatened by developmental pressures that could severely impact scarce natural resources, inhibit economic development, and endanger public health by polluting fresh water supplies. The karst area is characterized by low “haystack” mountains on a geological limestone formation that covers 27.5% of the island. It contains the island’s most extensive freshwater aquifer, the largest continuous expanse of mature forest, the largest coastal wetland, and an extensive underground cave system. What makes the karst so vital to Puerto Rico is its unique hydrologic cycle where rain water flows directly into the aquifers which supply substantial quantities of fresh water for Puerto Rico’s urban areas and its commercial infrastructure.

The way to preserve and protect this resource is to conserve as much as possible the existing forest cover and minimize land disturbances which could adversely impact aquifers. Such conservation efforts will have added benefits of maintaining biodiversity in some of the last remaining tropical forests on the island and providing open space and recreational opportunities for one of the most densely populated areas of the United States. The Forest Service’s International Institute of Tropical Forestry in San Juan has conducted extensive research into the Karst and its resources. The Institutes’ extensive study titled “Puerto Rican Karst – A Vital Resource” was published in August, 2001, and is available for the Committee and its staff.

H.R. 1644 would authorize cooperative conservation efforts to acquire, manage and protect tropical forest areas of the Karst region with emphasis on protecting water quality. Funding for such efforts will come from donations, appropriations for the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) and other sources, and from limited receipts generated from disposals of surplus properties. A significant portion of the Karst Region is already eligible for funding within the FLP and the FLP has already funded approximately \$1.4 million of land acquisition in the Karst Region. We

believe the Commonwealth is principally responsible for conservation efforts of the region, and supports the cooperative roles of the Federal Government and non-profit organizations envisioned in the measure.

The Department agrees the Karst Region is an important area of ecological diversity and notes existing authorities to provide technical and financial assistance to the Commonwealth are available to assist the Commonwealth with protection of this resource. However, if the Committee chooses to move the bill through the process, we would like to work with the Committee and bill sponsor to address Administration concerns with regards to the establishment of the Conservation Fund.

### **H.R. 2110 - Colorado Northern Front Range Mountain Backdrop Protection Study Act**

H.R. 2110 provides for a study of options for protecting the open space characteristics of certain lands in and adjacent to the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests in Colorado. In addition, the Secretary of Agriculture, acting through the Chief of the Forest Service and in consultation with appropriate State and local agencies, would review the lands within a study area and report to Congress on the present ownership of undeveloped lands, identify the undeveloped lands that may be at risk of development and identify and recommend actions that could be taken by all parties to preserve the open and undeveloped character of the lands.

The Department would like to work with the Committee and the bill sponsors on amendments to H.R. 2110 to specify Federal, State, and local entities cooperating in the study and to provide that recommendations for actions outside the National Forest boundaries would be made by the appropriate local land use planning and zoning authority, not the Secretary. The Department also recommends the study boundary be delineated on a geological or ecological feature rather than human created boundaries identified in section 2(b) (1). Moreover, the Department is particularly concerned with the cost associated with the bill which, if enacted, would be funded only at the expense of other work within the region or elsewhere within the Forest Service.

Loss of open space is identified by Chief Bosworth of the Forest Service as one of the four threats to our Nation's forests. Loss of open space poses a great challenge to effective land management. It causes loss of biodiversity and contributes to the degradation and loss of wildlife habitat. Loss of open space has three aspects:

- Habitat fragmentation – the division of habitats in forest and rangeland ecosystems into small isolated patches;
- Ownership fragmentation – the conversion of large acreages into smaller parcels; and
- Use fragmentation – the transformation of large single tracts used for forestry, farming, and ranching converted into multiple-use small tracts.

The Forest Service recently completed the "Forests on the Edge" (FOTE) report which highlights the threat of private forests from housing development. Based on the FOTE research, some 44.2 million acres (over 11 percent) of private forest across the conterminous United States could experience [substantial increases in housing density by 2030](#). The Forest Service is currently undertaking phase two of the Forest on the Edge which will assess housing density projections

up to 10 miles from the edge of each National Forest and Grassland boundary. In addition, the Forest Service has completed a study of the New York and New Jersey Highlands Region study. In the Highlands study, the Forest Service analyzed the resources and conservation values of the area, evaluated the potential changes and resources at risk, and then identified conservation strategies for the area.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.